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# Monsters, playboys, virgins and whores: Rape myths in the news media's coverage of sexual violence

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## Abstract

Much of the news media's coverage of sexual violence perpetuates myths and stereotypes about rape, rapists and rape victims (Burt, 1980). This is troubling, as the news media shapes public opinion about rape (Soothill, 1991) and can affect policy-making, not to mention the running of the legal system itself (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2006: 314). The news media frequently portray rapists using monster imagery (Barnett, 2008; Mason and Monckton-Smith, 2008; Soothill et al., 1990), their victims classed either as 'virgins' attacked by these so-called 'monsters' or instead as promiscuous women who invited the rape (Benedict, 1992). These depictions can impact upon public opinion as the more frequently rape myths are used, the more accessible they become. This can be harmful to rape victims when individuals who subscribe to these myths are involved in the criminal justice system (Franiuk et al., 2008: 304–305). Through a lexical analysis of the newspaper coverage surrounding three news events gathered from three LexisNexis searches, this article assesses the use of rape myths within the British and American news media's reporting of such violence.

## Keywords

Monster imagery, naming, news media, rape myths, sexual violence, victim blaming

## 1 Introduction

Rape myths, which can be defined as 'prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs, prejudices or stereotypes about rape, rapists, and rape victims' (Burt, 1980: 217), are prevalent within discussions of sexual violence. Popular rape myths about rape victims include:

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'only bad girls get raped', victims 'ask for it' (Burt, 1980: 217) by getting drunk at parties or wearing provocative clothing (Burt, 1980: 223), and women who claim they were raped are lying, have ulterior motives, or wanted sex at the time but changed their minds afterwards (Franiuk et al., 2008: 288–289). These myths shift the blame to the victim. Myths about rapists tend to portray the perpetrators as 'sex-starved, insane, or both' (Burt, 1980: 217) which implies that an instance of rape where the perpetrator cannot be described as such is not 'real' rape.

These myths frequently appear in the news media (Barnett, 2008; Benedict, 1992). It has been found that 'perpetrators of violence are regularly described as "beasts" or "perverts" and distanced from "ordinary" men' (Mason and Monckton-Smith, 2008: 694), imagery that has grown increasingly prevalent over time (Soothill et al., 1990). In much the same way, victims are often presented as virgins attacked by these monsters or, contrastingly, as promiscuous women who invited the rape and are therefore to blame (Benedict, 1992). Both are problematic and destructive to rape victims (Benedict, 1992). Reporting of this nature is troubling, as the media shapes public opinion about sexual violence (Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2006: 314) and its perpetrators (Levenson and D'Amora, 2007: 192). One study of newspaper reporting which exposed participants to either myth-endorsing or myth-challenging articles (Franiuk et al., 2008: 298–299) found that 'exposure to articles endorsing rape myths leads participants to be more likely to side with the defendant in a sexual assault case than prior to exposure'. Furthermore, sensationalistic journalism can spur short-sighted governmental actions that are less likely to protect communities in the long-term (Levenson and D'Amora, 2007: 190). These portrayals also reinforce stereotypes, which find their way into public opinion, policy, and the legal system (Carll, 2003; Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2006: 314).

In this article, I perform a lexical analysis of newspaper accounts of three rape cases, two from the USA and one from the UK, each of which represents a different type of sexual violence, to ascertain whether or not they disseminate rape myths. I will pay particular attention to portrayals of alleged rapists and rape victims as I assess the use of language within these stories, with a particular focus on imagery and naming. This investigation will therefore explore the ways in which the media frames and portrays sexual violence.

## **2 Synopsis of news events**

The first news case, the reporting of which I analyse, occurred in Dunblane, Scotland. In June of 2010, after being rejected by the woman he liked, 19-year-old Ryan Liddell began aimlessly wandering the streets. When he saw the door to one house was ajar, he went inside and, upon seeing the 76-year-old owner, he stripped her, demanded sex, and severely beat her. After neighbours heard her screams, Liddell was forced to abort the assault and flee. The woman's neighbours found her unconscious in a pool of blood. It was not until June 2011 that Liddell was convicted of attempted rape. This case was chosen so as to evaluate the employment of rape myths in cases of attempted rape. I was also interested in how the attack would be portrayed: as an act of sexual violence or as a

nonsexual assault? This case was notable because Liddell was a survivor of an attack himself, as a victim of the Dunblane school shootings. Back in 1996, when Liddell was five, Thomas Hamilton entered his gym class, shot Liddell in the arm, and killed 16 of Liddell's classmates before committing suicide. Liddell is said to have suffered from anxiety and sleeplessness since he was a child.

The second news case, the reports of which I analyse, occurred in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Ketchum, Idaho. Between 2003 and 2005, Jeffrey Marsalis, then in his early 30s, is thought to have drugged and raped at least 10 women. He met most of the women from Philadelphia on the dating website Match.com where, at different points, despite him technically being unemployed, he pretended to be an astronaut, a doctor, and a CIA agent. He met the woman from Idaho at a ski resort. None of the women knew each other yet they all described blacking out soon after leaving their drink in Marsalis' care, later regaining consciousness while he was raping them, though the use of drugs was never proven. Marsalis was tried for rape on three separate occasions. The first trial took place in Philadelphia in 2006, where he was acquitted of all three counts of rape. The second was again in Philadelphia in 2007, where he was charged with two counts of sexual assault but acquitted of eight counts of rape, and the third trial took place in Idaho in 2009, where he was convicted of one further count of rape.

The third news case, the reports of which I analyse took place in Cleveland, Texas. Between September and November 2010, an 11-year-old girl is thought to have been gang-raped on at least four separate occasions by men and boys from her town. Most reports discussed an attack that took place in late November 2010. On that occasion, the victim was at home when three individuals invited her out under the pretence of going for a drive. Instead, she was brought to one of the suspect's relative's houses and told she would be beaten if she did not undress. The girl was subsequently raped. Partway through the rape, the homeowner returned, and so the group fled to a nearby trailer where the attack continued. At some point, several perpetrators called friends and invited them to join in the rape. They also recorded the rape on their phones and circulated the images and video to friends and classmates. As of 30 April 2011, 19 people had been arrested, though as many as 28 may have participated in the assaults. The individuals charged range in age from 14 to 27 and include individuals with criminal records, but also star athletes, not to mention the son of a board of education member. Once the arrests began, the victim and her family began to receive threats. Police moved the girl into foster care for her safety and increased police presence near her family's home. However, the threats continued and forced the family into hiding.

### 3 Methodology

The news items here selected represent a cross-section of different types of cases; one was an attempted stranger rape, one a gang rape, and one a string of attacks by a serial date rapist. I had wanted to include an instance of acquaintance rape but was unable to find a news event that generated data of a comparable size to the others in my sample (the collection of which will be described next). This was unsurprising, as previous studies also found the news media gives disproportionate coverage to certain types of rape, such

**Table 1.** Data collection

	Liddell	Marsalis	Cleveland
<b>No. of articles</b>	33	66	25
<b>Word count</b>	10,753	37,491	14,046
<b>No. of newspapers</b>	13	5	9
<b>Search terms</b>	'Ryan Liddell' 'rape'	'Jeffrey Marsalis' 'rape'	'Cleveland' 'rape' 'girl'
<b>Search period</b>	1 Jun 2010 – 30 Jun 2011	1 Jan 2005 – 31 Jul 2009	1 Sep 2010 – 30 Apr 2011

as serial or gang rape (Soothill, 1991: 384), stranger rape, unusual cases, or fabrications (Franiuk et al., 2008: 291), which can cause the public to have an overly narrow understanding of rape (Flowe et al., 2009: 23) that excludes the most common type of rape, acquaintance rape.

In total, I analysed 124 articles gathered through three LexisNexis searches, one for each news case, as shown in Table 1. The articles appeared in a mix of broadsheets and tabloids as well as local and national publications. Duplicates, abstracts and unrelated articles were excluded from the analysis. The date ranges were selected so the news items would reflect various points of the cases' legal process: the dates for the Liddell search cover the attack, the trial and the sentencing; the dates for the Marsalis search cover the trials in Pennsylvania and Idaho; and the dates for the Cleveland search cover the period of the attacks through the arrests of the alleged perpetrators. Because of the large number of stories my search indicated, the chart in the Appendix only lists those texts directly quoted in this article.

In my quantitative analysis, I offer the raw figures and percentage of articles that use particular terms, such as 'devil'. To stay with this example, an article using the word 'devil' on one or more occasions would give us just one instance for calculation. If the article only uses a naming strategy such as 'devil' to refer to something or someone other than the rapist, the given term would not be included in the analysis.

**4 Analysis**

Coverage of the Liddell and Marsalis cases drew upon the motif of the monstrous rapist, an idea rooted in British Common law (Barnett, 2008: 192) and codified in many sexual predator laws (Wells and Motley, 2001: 130). This may be because Liddell and Marsalis could each be cast as a 'brutish male aggressor ... a sex-crazed, deviant sociopath ... [who] has no previous acquaintance with the victim' (Orenstein, 1998: 677), reinforcing the popular conception of rapists as 'sick, emotionally disturbed men' (Wells and Motley, 2001: 155). The public finds this narrative commonplace (Mason and Monckton-Smith, 2008: 694) even though it is in fact, in real terms, atypical. In the UK, 72% of rapes are committed by someone known to the victim (Flowe et al., 2009: 23). When attempted rapes are included, nine out of ten victims knew the perpetrator (Barnett, 2008: 182). Yet the belief persists that a 'real' rape involves extreme violence by a stranger (Mason and Monckton-Smith, 2008: 691).

When rape is sensationalised by the press, the perpetrator is transformed into an 'other', as was the case in the Marsalis texts. The word 'predator' appeared in 18% of articles (12 out of 66 articles in total). He was described as 'preying' on victims in 6% (4/66) of articles and 'hunting' them in one article. Additionally, three articles described him as a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'. In 6% (4/66) of articles, Marsalis was called 'sick', 'evil', a 'freak', or a 'sociopath'. In the Liddell texts, 30% (10/33) of articles and 18% (6/33) of headlines compared Liddell to a 'monster', 'devil', 'beast' or 'fiend'. The most popular term was 'devil', a word the victim used to describe Liddell, which appeared in 18% (6/33) of the articles. Journalists in 12% (4/33) of articles referred to Liddell as a 'fiend' and 12% (4/33) of articles called him a 'beast'. Verbs associated with animals, such as 'pounce', 'stalk' or 'prowl', appeared in 12% (4/33) of articles and 24% (8/33) of articles said Liddell was 'nocturnal' or 'semi-nocturnal'. In comparison, only two articles said he 'wiped away a tear' upon hearing the guilty verdict, one called him 'baby-faced' and one quoted a prison 'insider' who compared Liddell to the 'Milky Bar Kid', which shows descriptions and naming strategies that supported rape myths were used more often than ones which did not.

Not all press references to the rapist were inflammatory. For example, in the Liddell case, the media fixated on the Dunblane school shootings, which implied a connection between Liddell's childhood victimisation and his subsequent criminal behaviour. Although many articles noted that no other Dunblane survivor had been arrested for a crime, and even quoted a forensic psychologist who said that Dunblane did not cause Liddell's actions 15 years later, the constant reference to the massacre suggested it played a role in Liddell's violent conduct. Dunblane was mentioned in 70% (23/33) of articles and 48% (16/33) of headlines; 67% (22/33) of articles and 36% (12/33) of headlines called Liddell a 'survivor' of the school shootings. There was emphasis on the fact Liddell was harmed; 48% (16/33) said he was shot and 9% (3/33) said he was injured. Whether intentional or not, this focus on Dunblane may cause the reader to believe Hamilton's victimisation of Liddell led to Liddell's victimisation of the woman.

Yet the references to Dunblane make Liddell appear to be more than a mere 'monster'. For example, several papers said that, after the Dunblane shootings, Liddell's mother found him bleeding and bandaged, wondering if he was going to die. Articles also state Liddell was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder at age six, a year after the Dunblane attack, and generally suffered from anxiety since he was young. However, these references draw attention away from Liddell's victim. Of the four headlines with the word 'victim', three used it to reference Liddell himself and not the woman he attacked. This was not the case in the articles themselves: 55% (18/33) used 'victim' in relation to the woman. Additionally, 24% (8/33) mentioned the woman's suffering but not Liddell's, whereas 3% (1/33) mentioned Liddell's suffering but not the woman's. Furthermore, in articles that mentioned both Liddell and the woman's trauma, 82% (14/17) discussed the details of the Dunblane shooting before stating what happened to the woman. For example, the first sentence of the article headlined 'Dunblane survivor in violent sex attack' (Wilkie, 2011: see Appendix) reads: 'A Dunblane massacre survivor was last night facing a lengthy prison sentence after subjecting an elderly woman to a "despicable" sex attack.' The next three sentences relate to Dunblane or its aftermath followed by details about Liddell and his plans the night of the attack. It is not until line

16 that it mentions how the victim was hurt, and not until line 27 is reference made to the victim's subsequent mental and physical deterioration. Another story, 'Dunblane survivor guilty of trying to rape a 76-year-old woman' (Archibald, 2011: see Appendix), greatly details the shooting. It mirrors Liddell and the woman's experiences when it states they both feared for their lives. However, again more emphasis is placed on Dunblane. In line 12, it is noted that Liddell asked his mother 'Mummy am I going to die?' after Dunblane; not until the second to last line (line 34), does the article reference the victim's similar fear: 'after the attack she said she thought she was going to die'.

Although the article 'No excuse' (Archibald, 2011: see Appendix) argues Dunblane does not explain Liddell's actions, it primarily focuses on Liddell's ordeal during and after the shootings. It does not mention how Liddell's victim was hurt until line 18 and the lasting effects of the attack on the woman are not discussed until the end of the piece. This is not because the woman's suffering was trivial. She lost her independence, had to undergo surgery, and ended up in a nursing home. Only one article, 'You called him "the devil", you got that right' (McGivern, 2011: see Appendix), gives serious attention to how the woman's life was destroyed by the attack. The report does not reference Liddell's Dunblane injuries until line 10, and spends the rest of the article describing the victim's experience during the assault and its impact on her life.

The media shows a similar disregard for the rape victim in the Cleveland case. Most of the articles do not address the harm done to the victim. While journalistic guidelines may prevent reporters from disclosing too much detail, it is unlikely they preclude mentioning the rape's negative impact on the victim. Instead, the press was concerned with how the town or the rapists' families were themselves affected by the rape. While 28% (7/25) of articles addressed the pain of the community, only 16% (4/25) mentioned harm to the victim. Headlines include 'Cleveland on edge after rape charges' (Horswell, 2011: see Appendix) and 'Vicious assault shakes Texas town' (McKinley, 2011: see Appendix). The individuals interviewed often show little regard for the victim. Quotations include, 'It's just destroyed our community', and 'it's really tearing our community apart' (McKinley, 2011: 'Vicious assault shakes Texas town': see Appendix). One article quotes the defence attorney saying: 'It's a tragic situation, as we all have come to realise. The families are dealing with it – it's a very stressful environment' (UPI, 2011: see Appendix). While the attorney does not specify the families of whom he is speaking, it can be assumed he only interacts with the families of the four defendants he represents, not the victim or her family. Another article ignores the victim but quotes one of the defendants saying: 'They are trying to make us look bad' (McKinley, 2011: 'Speedy trials sought in rape case': see Appendix).

The headlines that do refer to the girl often refer to her subsequent victimisation, such as 'Some in Texas town blaming young girl in assault' (Lozano, 2011: see Appendix) and 'Degrading cycle targets girls: Backlash against child victim in Texas highlights sexualization, shaming of girls' (Campbell, 2011: see Appendix). Only one story mentions her physical trauma and one other said she became withdrawn after the attacks; 20% (5/25) of articles mentioned she had been placed in foster care for her protection after receiving threats. These statistics show the press was more concerned with the impact of the rape on the town than on the victim.



Reporters may not have access to the victim or her family, but they can interview counsellors or medical professionals about the effects of sexual violence. In this case, in choosing not to do so, they made light of the rape. Some papers tried to give depth to the victim; 8% (2/25) refer to her as someone's daughter and 8% (2/25) mention her intelligence. However, there was far more emphasis on how she dressed or acted. A much-criticised *New York Times* article said: 'she dressed older than her age, wearing makeup and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her 20s. She would hang out with teenage boys at a playground' (McKinley, 2011: 'Vicious assault shakes Texas town': see Appendix). This description implies the rape was the victim's fault or that she provoked the attack, echoing the prevalent myth: 'women ask for it' (Burt, 1980: 217). A columnist in the *Daily News* speculates that men who had sons or were childless

were uniformly disgusted, but also perhaps sympathetic to the accused young men. But what if they had daughters of their own who had been raped because of how they dressed or with whom they consorted? Would the accused deserve sympathy then? (Crouch, 2011: see Appendix)

Although the author seems to defend the victim, 'because of' implies her attire and actions made her entirely responsible for the attack. However, a few sentences later, he contradictorily writes: 'I do not think that rape should be qualified by the dress of the victim, even if she seems to be a "video vixen" in training. Yet irony always walks tall in American life' (Crouch, 2011: see Appendix). This summons the myth of the promiscuous rape victim (Burt, 1980: 217), one the defence attorney planned to use, as he said the victim was seeking attention and wants to be a porn star.

An *Associated Press* article begins by stating community leaders feel the girl is being re-victimised by questions about parental supervision and her attire. However, it then references another leader who wonders why she did not report the attack and states that some community members 'blamed the girl for the way she dressed and claimed she lied about her age' (2011: 'Latina leader defends alleged young rape victim': see Appendix). There is no mention of the rape's brutality and yet, in 136 words, it says she is an 'alleged young rape victim' who was 'allegedly sexually assaulted' and 19 people have been arrested 'in connection with several alleged incidents', the extensive use of 'alleged' implying that a crime might indeed not have taken place here.

In the follow-up to its first article, the *New York Times* again suggests the victim's behaviour contributed to the rape. One passage says, 'She had been sneaking out of the house two or three nights a week ... climbing out a bedroom window. Some nights she would come home as late as 11 p.m. or midnight' (Goode and McKinley, 2011). This casts her as a devious child, which can have implications in court. As Phipps (2009: 674) puts it, 'those who fail to meet the respectability criterion are thought to have permanent consent to sexual violation written into their behaviour'.

Some articles did, nevertheless, attempt to dispel rape myths. For example, one argues: 'An 11-year-old child bears no responsibility for being assaulted, regardless of how she conducts herself. She is a child. The individuals who assaulted her are totally responsible' (Horswell, 2011: 'It takes a village': see Appendix). Another states: 'The blame for the atrocities that transpired in that trailer in Cleveland lies with those who perpetrated them, not their victim, her fashions or her Facebook posts' (Campbell, 2011:



see Appendix). Yet a third implies she might have been judged differently had she been older. It says, 'It doesn't matter if she wore makeup. Or if she hung out with older boys at the playground, as some have claimed. Or if she bragged about sex on her Facebook page. All that matters is that she is 11. She couldn't have consented, not even if she wanted to' (Falkenberg, 2011: see Appendix). The use of 'all that matters' suggests her appearance, friends, or Facebook page could have been taken into account if the victim had been an adult.

Since the victim is a child, blame was also cast on her parents. One of the neighbours is quoted saying: 'Where was her mother? What was her mother thinking?' (McKinley, 2011: 'Vicious assault shakes Texas town': see Appendix). In lines 12 to 13 of another article, one activist says members of the victim's community 'have a right to be angry with the ... men who ravaged a young girl ... but the first house you need to stop at is her Mama and Daddy's house!' (Horswell, 2011: 'Cleveland on edge after rape charges': see Appendix). In lines 27 to 28, the article briefly touches upon locals who fear she is being re-victimised but then mentions the derogatory comments of other residents, the claims of the defence attorney, and a website that posted a sexual picture of the girl and called her a 'snitch', details which draw attention away from the trauma of the rape itself. It is not until line 39 that there is any mention of the threatened use of force.

Indeed much of the coverage of this case shifts accountability away from those responsible. One reporter states the rape 'left many residents in the working-class neighbourhood where the attack took place with unanswered questions. Among them is, if the allegations are proved, how could their young men have been drawn into such an act?' (McKinley, 2011: 'Vicious assault shakes Texas town': see Appendix). The passive voice use of the phrasal verb 'drawn into' implies the rapists were not to blame as their actions were beyond their control. Another reporter similarly writes: 'Many have been left wondering how so many young males could stand accused of violating a sixth-grade student' (Horswell, 2011: 'A look at 19 accused in rape of girl': see Appendix). Again the emphasis is on the accusation, not the action. Yet another article makes no attempt to hold the perpetrators accountable. It quotes one of the defendants' aunts saying: 'Our younger generation is running rampant ... The devil is in full control' (Goode and McKinley, 2011: see Appendix), blaming the devil for what happened.

Coverage of the Marsalis case elicits the myth that women who drink are asking to get raped (Burt, 1980: 223). Marsalis' defence attorneys argued that the women should not have put themselves at risk by drinking, should have known better than to have gone out with a strange man, and should have to live with the consequences of consuming too much alcohol and blacking out. One reporter tries to refute this claim and states sarcastically that the public might believe that if you date, you need to accept that 'bad sex' happens and should not complain about it '[e]specially if you're a really bad girl and you go out for a *drink*' (Porter, 2007). Porter's appropriation of 'bad sex' and 'bad girl' and italicisation of 'drink' attempts to dispel the myth that women who consume alcohol are to be blamed for the rape.

Yet the attorneys' assertions are in keeping with popular belief; it has been found that intoxicated rape complainants are seen as culpable for their rape because any such victim

has exhibited a reckless disregard for her own safety by sending out a message of sexual interest through her intoxication and by placing herself in a position in which she is vulnerable to the inevitable sexual aggression of an intoxicated male companion. (Finch and Munro, 2007: 595)

Through its fixation with the role of alcohol in the case, the press implies there was a link between drinking and rape: 59% (39/66) of articles said the women had had a 'drink' and 27% (18/66) mentioned alcohol; 24% (16/66) of articles said the victims 'blacked out', either from their own drinking or from having been drugged, 15% (10/66) called them 'intoxicated' and 5% (3/66) called them 'drunk'. This emphasis on drunkenness has severe implications in court. Several studies found that both men and women believe that women who drink alcohol in the company of men are more likely to 'be more sexually disinhibited, more sexually available, and more likely to enjoy being seduced than a non-drinking counterpart' (Finch and Munro, 2007: 594). A columnist echoes this belief when he quotes a 'reformed-Playboy' saying: 'We have all pushed a woman into having that one more drink ... [b]ecause it loosens her up' (Bykofsky, 2007). The columnist then writes, that '[t]aking that drink is voluntary on her part. Putting chemicals in her drink breaks the Playboy Code' (Bykofsky, 2007). This focus on 'chemicals' and the comparison of Marsalis to a 'playboy' or womaniser implies, incorrectly, that the alleged use of drugs was Marsalis' only crime; it completely ignores his failure to obtain consent for sex. The press's attention to the possibility of drugs having been used by the attacker also shifts focus away from the lack of consent. Marsalis was accused of drugging his victims in 83% (55/66) of articles, even though this had not been proven; 9% (6/66) said he 'slipped something into their drinks' and one called him the 'Chemical Casanova'. This creates the impression that other types of rape, such as date rape without the presence of drugs, are not 'real' rape, a belief echoed by a columnist who wrote that women have a right to accuse a man of rape

only if he drugs her, uses a weapon or renders her unable to consent. Because anything less than that turns into a he says / she says scenario. And a man's freedom shouldn't hinge on whether he's a mind reader. (Flowers, 2007)

This statement removes all culpability from the man for not obtaining consent and places the blame for all types of rape, other than those mentioned, on the victim.

There was very little victim blaming in the Liddell case. This may be because it fits the myth of a violent, maniacal rapist in that the victim was attacked by an aggressive stranger. In cases that adhere to rape myths, the victims are more likely to be believed and the cases are more likely to be prosecuted (Franiuk et al., 2008: 305). Additionally, as the woman was elderly and therefore more difficult to portray sexually, it is harder for reporters to blame her for the rape. Indeed there was considerable emphasis on the woman's age: 91% (30/33) of articles mentioned that the victim was 76. The most popular words to describe her were 'pensioner', used in over half of articles, 'gran' or 'grandmother' in 42% (14/33), 'OAP' (for Old Age Pensioner) in 39% (8/33) of articles, and elderly in 36% (12/33). In contrast, only two articles called Liddell a 'kid', one a 'lad', one a 'youth', and one a 'teenager'. The many references to the victim's age were perhaps employed to attract readers, yet suggest the victim's fragility.

This attack's violence was frequently referenced: 27% (9/33) of articles called it 'appalling', 21% (7/33) 'brutal', 21% (7/33) 'violent' and 18% (6/33) 'despicable'. The

verbs 'kick' and 'punch' appeared in 52% (17/33) of articles, 'batter' in 36% (12/33), 'drag' in 36% (12/33), and 'beat' in 21% (7/33). 'Blood' was mentioned in 39% (13/33) of articles and 18% (6/33) said the victim was 'unconscious'. The woman's screams were referenced in 39% (13/33) of articles and 18% (6/33) referred to her as 'hysterical'. All but one article used the word 'rape', 76% (25/33) used 'attack' and 64% (21/33) used 'assault'. The word 'rape' appeared in 21% (7/33) of the headlines, 'attack' in 42% (14/33). Unlike other cases, coverage of the Liddell case resoundingly supported the woman's claim. Only 15% (5/33) of articles used the word 'alleged' in reference to the assault.

The crime in the Cleveland case could be described as a sexual assault, gang rape, acquaintance rape, paedophilia, or child abuse. However, as one article states, '[i]f the horrific descriptions in court documents are true, and this sixth-grade girl from Cleveland endured hours of lurid, brutal sex with a gang of at least 17 men and boys ... there is only one word for it: rape' (Falkenberg, 2011: see Appendix). Yet only 24% (6/25) of articles mentioned the victim was threatened with force. In comparison, 24% (6/25) of articles called the rape 'having sex' and 12% (3/25) 'engaging in sexual acts'. The myth that rape is sex is the most powerful one of all, and lies at the root of all others (Benedict, 1992). It

leads to the mistaken belief that rape does not hurt the victim any more than sex [does]. The idea that rape is a sexual rather than an aggressive act encourages people not to take it seriously as a crime – an attitude frequently revealed by defense attorneys and newspaper columnists. (Benedict, 1992: 14)

As the victim was 11, the attack could be called 'paedophilia' but this term appeared in only one article, and just one article described the accused as 'child sex offenders', surprising since every article used the word 'girl' in reference to the victim, 52% (13/25) called her an 11-year-old, and 28% (7/25) a sixth grader. 60% (15/25) called her a child, the same percentage that described her as a victim.

## 5 Conclusion

In the cases analysed here, the majority of articles perpetuated rape myths: the Cleveland case primarily engaged in victim blaming, the Liddell case employed the myth of the sociopathic rapist, and the Marsalis case used a combination of these strategies. Furthermore, in all three cases analysed, the impact of the attacks on the victims was largely overlooked, which had the effect of trivialising the crime. While some journalists may purposely employ these myths to sensationalise a story, others may have internalised 'our culture's beliefs about sexual assault. Journalists may believe that they are merely presenting reasonable alternatives to a sexual assault claim' (Franiuk et al., 2008: 302).

In either case, the use of stereotypes hinders discussions about the real causes of sexual violence. If the perpetrator is a devious monster, rape becomes a random act of violence rather than a societal problem.

By presenting stories of violence against women as separate isolated events, the news media reinforces the idea that the violence was an isolated pathology or deviance. Maintaining this

mirage of individual pathology, the news media denies the social roots of violence against women and absolves the larger society of any obligation to end it. (Carll, 2003: 1603)

As the primary source of information for most people (Levenson and D'Amora, 2007: 192), the news media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion. Therefore, a misleading representation of sexual violence may cause the public, police, and members of the court to revert to these understandings when establishing definitions of rape (Soothill, 1991: 392). In order to combat the problem of sexual violence, the news media must provide accurate examples of rape that do not fit preconceived notions or conform to myths. Only through doing so can the media begin to address the wider societal issues that contribute to this crime.

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## Author biography

Shannon O'Hara is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Her research interests include contemporary literature and gender.

## Appendix

### Newspaper articles cited

Cleveland articles		
Newspaper title	The <i>Houston Chronicle</i>	
Article author	Horswell	
Article title	Cleveland on edge after rape charges: Racial tensions that simmered before alleged assault now at a boil: Quanell X claims race a factor in some arrests (11 Mar 2011)	Falkenberg All that matters about victim: She is a child. A revolting strategy at work (10 Mar 2011)
Newspaper title	The <i>New York Times</i>	
Article author	McKinley	
Article title	Speedy trials sought in rape case (5 Apr 2011)	Daily News (New York) Crouch Our women, more than prostitutes (14 Mar 2011)
Newspaper title	The <i>Associated Press</i>	
Article author	No byline	UPI No byline
	It takes a village: The vile attacks on a Cleveland child raise questions for all communities (15 Apr 2011)	A look at 19 accused in rape of girl: Group charged in Cleveland has some with clean records, others known by the law; Their stories seep out through Facebook pages (27 Mar 2011)
	Vicious assault shakes Texas town (9 Mar 2011)	Goode and McKinley 3-month nightmare emerges in rape inquiry (29 Mar 2011)
	Lozano	St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri) Campbell

Appendix. (Continued)

Article title	Latina leader defends alleged young rape victim (28 Mar 2011)	Some in Texas town blaming young girl in assault (11 Mar 2011)	Degrading cycle targets girls: Backlash against child victim in Texas highlights sexualization, shaming of girls (31 Mar 2011)	18 charged in rape of girl, 11 (7 Mar 2011)
Liddell articles				
Newspaper title	<i>Daily Record</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>The Express</i>	<i>The Herald (Glasgow)</i>
Article author	McGivern	Archibald	Wilkie	Archibald
Article title	'You called him "the devil", you got that right': Victim's family hit back over Dunblane sex beast (4 Jun 2011)	No excuse (3 Jun 2011)	Dunblane survivor in violent sex attack (3 Jun 2011)	Dunblane survivor guilty of trying to rape a 76-year-old woman (3 Jun 2011)
Marsalis articles				
Newspaper title	<i>The Philadelphia Daily News</i>			
Article author	Bykofsky	Flowers	Porter	
Article title	Marsalis a 'playboy'? Playboy says no (18 Jun 2007)	Marsalis gets off? That's the law (14 Jun 2007)	Date-rape's burden, this trial confirms, is heavier than ever (8 Jun 2007)	